**Study Questions for T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."**

[**Vocabulary**](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms.html): allusion, alter ego, catachresis, dramatic monologue, epigraph, persona, simile, stream of consciousness, synecdoche

**Introduction: complete the close reading assignment. Be prepared for an assessment (socratic seminar, small group, quiz, other).**

**Identify the following characters and images:**

J. Alfred Prufrock, John the Baptist, Michelangelo, the Eternal Footman, Lazarus, Prince Hamlet, singing mermaids

**Reading Questions**:

1. Read the translation of the quotation in Italian from Dante's *Inferno* that serves as our epigraph, and return to it once you have finished the whole poem. Why do you suppose T.S. Eliot wants to begin the poem this way? How is the damned soul speaking his secrets from the flames of hell in a similar situation to J. Alfred Prufrock? How is the audience of that damned soul (Dante's persona) in a similar situation to the audience listening to J. Alfred Prufrock's frantic confessions?
2. In the opening line, the speaker states, "Let us go then, you and I." Who is the *you* here? (Several possibilities here).
3. The speaker (Prufrock) compares the sunset to a "patient etherised upon a table." Why do you suppose Prufrock would compare a sunset to some hospital patient who has been anesthetized and is waiting for an operation?
4. The speaker refers to the surrounding cityscape as having "one-night cheap hotels" and "sawdust restaurants." What is this part of town like, apparently?
5. In the second stanza, we have two lines that are disjointed from the earlier stanza. Here, Prufrock's mind appears to flash to a different location, where the "women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." Who was Michelangelo? If the women are spending all their time talking about high Renaissance art, how must their situation and their location be different from Prufrock's current place of wandering?
6. The next stanza break flashes away from the room with the women. Where are we now? Have we returned to the first location? Why or why not?
7. What is the yellow fog compared to in a simile? How is the fog like such a creature?
8. What does Prufrock mean when he says, "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet"? Have you ever had to "prepare a face" before you have met someone? Why would one try to prepare an artificial face?
9. Prufrock says "there will be time to murder to create." Is he being literal here, and talking about actually killing people and creating new ones? Or does this connect with the earlier passage about "preparing a face?" Or does it connect with the latter passage about "a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred indecisions"?
10. Prufrock says there will be time for all this "Before the taking of a toast and tea." Apparently, Prufrock is trying to boost his courage before undertaking what frightening mission? Why would such a simple task be so terrifying to Prufrock?
11. After a fifth stanza that flashes back to the room of artsy women, the sixth stanza has Prufrock asking, "Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?" What is that Prufrock is daring himself to do? Why is he so frightened about that room full of brainy women discussing art?
12. Prufrock reassures himself that there will be "Time to turn back and descend the stair." What does he mean by this, i.e., what can he do if he changes his mind? Why do you suppose T. S. Eliot chooses the verb *descend* rather than *ascend*? Does this connect with the Dante quotation about a guy trapped in hell in any way?
13. What physical features cause Prufrock anxiety as he imagines going down the stairs? What does he imagine people will say about him?
14. What does Prufrock mean, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" How can one thin, balding, aging man disturb the entire universe?
15. What does Prufrock mean, "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons"? How big is a coffee spoon? How regularly does a person use such as spoon?
16. What does Prufrock mean when he says he has already known the "eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase"? How can the way someone looks at you or the way someone uses a "formulated" label for you leave you fixed in place and trapped?
17. Prufrock imagines people's eyes stabbing through his body and impaling him to the wall where he wriggles as people examine him--why would Prufrock use this imagery from bug-collecting? How is appropriate or inappropriate?
18. Prufrock asks how he can begin to spit out all the "butt-ends" of his days and ways. If a butt-end is the left-over bit of a smoked cigar, what does he imply about how he has spent his life?
19. When Prufrock says he has "known the arms" already, how is this an example of synecdoche? What is he talking about? Why is so strangely excited to note that these bare, braceleted arms with white skin are lightly downed with faint hair?
20. Explain the anastrophe in "arms that wrap about a shawl." Think about it for a moment: what's weird about the phrasing?
21. Note the [synecdoche](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_S.html#synecdoche_anchor) in lines 73-74. Why doesn't Prufrock compare himself to a complete crab? Why is a crab particularly appropriate for Prufrock generally? (Ask a marine biologist about the way crabs travel and see how it matches the way Prufrock travels through life....)
22. Explain the biblical allusion to John the Baptist in lines 81-82.
23. Who are what is "The Eternal Footman"? Why is this footman or servant snickering at Prufrock?
24. In line 87, the verb tense switches to rhetorical pluperfect "would it have been worth it?" What does this shift in verb tense indicate? What changes in Prufrock's mind or in his plans between lines 86 to line 87?
25. Explain how Prufrock is connected to Lazarus in lines 94 *et passim*? How does this reference to coming back from the dead also connect with Dante and the initial epigram at the beginning of the poem?
26. What do we make of Prufrock's protest that he is not "Prince Hamlet"? Why is it ironic or appropriate that Prufrock thinks of Hamlet as his epitome of a great hero? (Think back to Hamlet's nature in *Hamlet*....)
27. Why is Prufrock agonizing over how to wear his trousers?
28. What's odd about the way Prufrock contemplates combing his "hair behind"? Does one normally comb his hair from the rear to cover the forward part of the head? What does this suggest about the aging Prufrock's hair and why he combs his hair forward this way?
29. Why is Prufrock stymied by the thought of eating peach? Why would eating a peach in public be problematic for him?
30. Prufrock imagines beautiful mermaids singing along the beach, but what does he fear or doubt in the following line?
31. Prufrock imagines himself under the water with the mermaids in "chambers of the sea." What happens at the end though when he hears the conversation of human voices around him that awakens him from his daydream?

**Passages for Identification**: Be able to explain who wrote this passages, what work they come from, and briefly explain their significance, context, or importance in the work.

**A**: Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table?  
  
**B**: In the room, the women come and go  
Speaking of Michelangelo.

**C**: And indeed, there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair."

**D**: For I have known them all already, known them all--  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.

**E:** Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,  
I am no prophet, and here's no great matter.

**F.** Would it have been worthwhile,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question?

**G:** I grow old . . . I grow old. . . .I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk along the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think they will sing to me.

**H:** We have lingered in the chambers of the sea,  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown